UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES
OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

DIRECTOR

January 13, 2025

Dear Colleagues:

We have a shared responsibility to ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that is consistent with the goals in their individualized education programs (IEP) to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. This requires that all children with disabilities have available to them well-prepared special educators and specialized instructional support personnel (special education personnel) who have the knowledge and skills to promote high expectations and provide evidence-based interventions and services that improve their outcomes. While we primarily rely on our institutions of higher education to prepare special education personnel, it is the responsibility of State educational agencies (SEA) and local educational agencies (LEA) to develop, support, and retain these personnel. As your partner in these efforts, I am writing to inform you of available resources from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and its technical assistance projects to assist you in your efforts.

Special education personnel serve a critical role in our nation's public schools, yet 45 percent of schools reported vacancies in special education roles, and 78 percent reported difficulty in hiring special education staff.[1] Special education personnel shortages have been a longstanding challenge in most States and have only worsened since the COVID-19 global pandemic. We know that principals play a key role in educator retention. Educators report that principals' leadership can significantly affect special educator morale, workload management, educator effectiveness and perceptions of working conditions, improving overall job satisfaction and in turn retention.[2] Interestingly, an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) study found that while special educator exit-interviews indicate that more supportive administration may have kept them in their jobs, principals indicated they were unaware of the breadth of special educators' responsibilities, and did not feel confident in providing special education personnel with the support they need to be retained in their roles. By providing principals with needed professional

[1] Whittaker, M. (2023, May 9). High Standards & Innovative Solutions: How Some States are Addressing the Special Educator Shortage Crisis [Blog post]. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://sites.ed.gov/osers/2023/05/high-standards-innovative-solutions-how-some-states-are-addressing-the-special-educator-shortage-crisis/.

[2] Bettini, E. and Gilmour, A. (2024). *Addressing Special Education Staffing Shortages: Strategies for Schools.* EdResearch for Action. https://edresearchforaction.org/research-briefs/addressing-special-education-staffing-shortages-strategies-for-schools/

development and technical assistance, principals will have the knowledge and resources necessary to support and retain special education personnel.

With support from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), OSEP recently participated in a series of roundtable discussions with school administrators from across the nation to identify barriers to, and supports which improve, retention of special education personnel. During the roundtable discussions, school administrators shared experiences with, concerns about, and promising practices to retain special education personnel. Principals acknowledged common themes that contribute to attrition including role ambiguity and feeling disconnected, poor staff collaboration, lack of autonomy, lack of knowledge, lack of respect and feeling undervalued, unmanageable workloads, work life balance, burnout, and lack of family engagement.

In fiscal year 2024, in alignment with our effort to Raise the Bar and boldly improve learning conditions by eliminating educator shortages, OSEP awarded over $80 million under IDEA to fund programs to assist States and local districts to improve outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, including more than $17 million for 78 new Personnel Preparation and Professional Development-Related Grants to improve the pipeline for, and support the retention of, special education personnel. Likewise, several OSEP-funded technical assistance centers are engaged in work supporting the preparation and retention of well-qualified special education personnel:

- The CEEDAR Center builds States' capacity to prepare teachers and leaders to implement evidence-based practices within multi-tiered systems of support for children with disabilities.
- The Lead IDEA Center builds the capacity of local leaders to implement IDEA within their programs and schools serving children with disabilities from birth through secondary.
- The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center supports State Part C and Part B Section 619 programs in developing high-quality early intervention and preschool special education systems.
- The Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Center supports States and IHEs in building a competent diverse workforce to improve outcomes for infants and young children with disabilities.
- The IRIS Center provides a variety of resources to support the preparation and professional development of special education personnel.
- The National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) supports States through targeted technical assistance to implement effective general supervision and professional development systems.

In addition to providing targeted support to individual States, each of these technical assistance centers provide "off-the-shelf" resources that can assist in your efforts to develop, support, and retain special education personnel.

In collaboration with the CEEDAR and LEAD IDEA Centers, I am pleased to launch the Principal Navigator: Special Educator Retention. Featured in this navigator are the Department's two recent, non-regulatory guidance documents: Supporting a Diverse Educator Workforce to Strengthen Teaching and Learning and ESEA Title II Strategic Use of Funds. The navigator includes high leverage practices and actionable steps that can be used immediately by local administrators to improve retention of special education personnel. The navigator organizes and makes readily available resources that address common issues, such as role ambiguity, poor collaboration, lack of knowledge and skills, workload, burnout, family engagement, and disputes.

Children with disabilities have limitless potential that is unleashed and channeled by outstanding special education personnel working hand-in-hand with general educators and families. We have heard from the special education personnel and the principals who support them that we must do more to provide the development and support necessary to keep them in the classrooms. Accessing and implementing the included resources are steps that you can take to address their needs. It is a privilege to be with you on this journey.

Sincerely,

Valerie C. Williams

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